



### 131 Marc-Aurèle Fortin

ARCA 1888 – 1970

#### Paysage Grande-Vallée

casein on board, signed and on verso signed, titled and inscribed *caséine / M-36 / ORNN*, 1949  
36 x 48 in, 91.4 x 121.9 cm

#### PROVENANCE

Galerie L'Art français, Montreal  
Private Collection  
*Art canadien et européen*, Encans Pinneys,  
June 14, 2005, lot 179  
Galerie Claude Lafitte, Montreal  
Private Collection, Montreal

#### LITERATURE

“Liste des prix,” *Exposition Marc-Aurèle Fortin*, Galerie Jean-Pierre Valentin Archives, 1949, Galerie L'Art français Documentary fund (1948–1954), titled as *Grande-Vallée, vue d'est*  
Rolland Boulanger, “M.-A. Fortin, décorateur,” *Le Canada*, Montreal, October 27, 1949, page 9  
“L'Art Français Shows Paintings by Fortin,” *The Gazette*, Montreal, October 29, 1949, page 25  
“Marc-Aurèle Fortin,” *La Presse*, Montreal, November 5, 1949  
“Marc-Aurèle Fortin, A.R.C.A., Harry Mayerovitch, Paintings, Exhibition Gallery XII, March 26–April 11, 1954,” Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Archives Exhibitions Funds 1910–1950, March 26, 1954, MBAM-E1  
Guy Robert, *Marc-Aurèle Fortin: l'homme à l'oeuvre*, 1976, page 56  
Jean-Claude Leblond, “Hommage à Marc-Aurèle Fortin,” *Le Devoir*, Montreal, December 4, 1976, page 33

Guy Robert, *Fortin l'oeuvre et l'homme*, 1982, page 90, dated 1952 incorrectly  
Galerie Claude Lafitte, *The Gazette*, Montreal, October 15, 2005, page Life-3  
Michèle Grandbois, *Marc-Aurèle Fortin: The Experience of Colour*, Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, 2010, pages 183 and 257  
Régis Tremblay, “Les couleurs de Marc-Aurèle Fortin au Musée national des beaux-arts,” *Le Soleil*, Quebec City, February 10, 2011, dated 1952 incorrectly

#### EXHIBITED

Galerie L'Art français, Montreal, *M.-A. Fortin*, October 24–November 5, 1949, titled as *Grande-Vallée, vue d'est*, catalogue #11  
Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, *Marc-Aurèle Fortin et Harry Mayerovitch*, March 26–April 11, 1954, catalogue #22  
Gallery IV of the Entrance Hall of the Queen Elizabeth Hôtel, Montreal, *Exhibition Marc-Aurèle Fortin R.C.A.A.*, December 12–19, 1958, catalogue #17  
Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, Quebec City, *Marc-Aurèle Fortin: The Experience of Colour*, February 10–May 8, 2011, traveling to McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, May 28–September 11, 2011, catalogue #107

MARC-AURÈLE FORTIN'S PROLIFIC career spanned half a century (1910 to 1960), during which his expressive power scarcely wavered until the very end, when diabetes complications and faltering eyesight made painting practically impossible. He was among the most important landscape artists of his time, and his contribution to Quebec and Canadian art is inestimable. From the beginning, and all through his career, Fortin espoused a specifically French Canadian and nationalistic art, rooted in the land and its people, in which he was part of a trend that dominated Quebec in the first four decades of the twentieth century. But a more progressive movement, open to the avant-garde ideas of the Paris School, was gaining force in Montreal at the same time, culminating in 1948 with the manifestos *Prisme d'yeux*, associated with Alfred Pelland, and *Refus global*, centring on Paul-Émile Borduas. Fortin was thus something of a paradox—stubbornly defending tradition even as his works shared the stylistic audacity of the Post-Impressionists, considered by Borduas's champions of *l'art vivant* as the height of modernity. Critic Jean Chauvin, a little nonplussed by it all, allowed in 1927 that “what we might take for intentional effrontery, irreverence, or innovation is for him entirely uncalculated. [Fortin] paints from the heart, with no desire to cause scandal or make trouble.”<sup>1</sup> All doubt would at last be dispelled when Fortin was elected an associate of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts in 1942. True to himself, he proudly accepted the recognition of that venerable academic institution so hated by Montreal's partisans of modernity.

One way to encapsulate Fortin's approach might be to examine the landscape themes running through it. First there are his vivid, expressive accounts of Sainte-Rose, the village where he was born, with its great elms. In contrast to that green paradise came Fortin's views of Montreal—that large, fast-growing metropolitan centre. His engravings, watercolours and oils considered

industrial operations in its port and the construction of the Jacques Cartier Bridge as subjects. Then, after a trip of several months to France from 1933 to 1934, began the period of summer wanderings, that between 1936 and 1940 took him to the coast near Quebec City, Île d'Orléans, and Charlevoix. Next he painted the Gaspé Peninsula, from 1940 to 1945, and Saguenay, from 1945 to 1949. He then abandoned those long summer adventures, from which he would return with sketches and watercolours to transform into large canvas and board paintings back in his workshop. Beginning in 1940, his work began appearing regularly at Galerie L'Art français on Laurier Street West in Montreal.

In 1948, due to the Automatist manifesto *Refus global*, the demands of artists in Quebec became front-page news. Fortin however, unsurprisingly, remained aloof, continuing to practise what art historian David Karel described as “Modernist Regionalism.”<sup>2</sup> That year, Fortin, 60 years old and struggling with diabetes, contemplated the prospect of abandoning those extended explorations of outlying parts of the province he had made in the last dozen years. He did not, however, abandon the work on new plastic effects that had been central to his vision from the beginning. He first tried casein paint on the recommendation of his art supplies dealer, J.R. Crowley.<sup>3</sup> “Fortin swears by casein,” reported Joseph Jutras, “he says it's a wonder—like fresco in the olden days.”<sup>4</sup> Casein, the main protein in cow's milk, is a powder that can be turned into milk paint, better known as casein tempera. It has been in use since ancient times, although in the sixteenth century it was gradually eclipsed by oils. In the twentieth century, however, it made a comeback. Canadian painters used it, including André Biéler, and in 1954 Alex Colville painted his famous *Horse and Train* (collection of the Art Gallery of Hamilton) in casein tempera.

“Fortin would buy boxes of powdered milk to mix with water and add to commercial colours in tubes,” reported René Buisson. “The combination got him denser impastos, which proved ideal for clouds.”<sup>5</sup> The period of Fortin's work in oils on black and grey backgrounds (1936 to 1948) was over, and for him, the age of casein began in 1949. Fortin's 1949 marriage to Gabrielle Goyette may also have made him more settled. He worked enthusiastically in the new medium, thrilled both by the matte colour surfaces and how quickly it dried. Fortin's dazzling vision of Grande-Vallée [from the east],<sup>6</sup> painted in 1949, is emblematic of his final creative period from 1949 to 1955. It may be based on a watercolour of the scene from earlier in the decade, perhaps painted during a stopover in Grande-Vallée, a village in Gaspé on the shores of the St. Lawrence Estuary. Or perhaps on a sketch whose composition has been reworked and transformed into this virtuoso showpiece. There is no proof one way or the other. Sarah Mainguy, author of the Marc-Aurèle Fortin catalogue raisonné, records that Fortin first painted Grande-Vallée in oil, around 1945.<sup>7</sup>

Fortin's astonishing vision shows us the raw wildness of Gaspé's northern coastal headlands, with the tiny fishing and farming community settled there over the centuries. *Paysage Grande-Vallée* is a symphony of colours and motifs, inviting the viewer to examine each piece of this colossal jigsaw—rows of cod boats, rocky points jutting out into the sparkling waters,





detail



detail

sailboats on the horizon, roiling skies bubbling with massive cumulus clouds, blocks of mountains with their high summits stretched out of proportion and patchwork bands of farmland. Gable-roofed village houses cluster around the Catholic church of St. François-Xavier, unaltered since its construction in 1910. Unlike Fortin's landscapes painted in oil, *Paysage Grande-Vallée* allows the underlying brown board to show through abundantly, replacing the black Fortin had formerly used to delineate forms. Fortin was also an incomparable watercolourist who used the bare paper to enhance forms. In *Paysage Grande-Vallée*, the support of wood joins with the new velvety, matte texture of the casein.

For Jean-René Ostiguy, curator of Canadian art at the National Gallery of Canada and curator of the 1964 Fortin retrospective there, *Paysage Grande-Vallée* displays "all the marks of true poetry."<sup>8</sup> Forty-seven years later, this magistral work was again a centrepiece of the retrospective *Marc-Aurèle Fortin: The Experience of Colour*, put on by the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec.

We thank Michèle Grandbois, editor of the book *Marc-Aurèle Fortin: The Experience of Colour*, for contributing the above essay, translated from the French.

1. Jean Chauvin, "Chez le peintre Marc-Aurèle Fortin," *La Revue populaire* (Montreal) 20, no. 9 (September 1927): 11.

2. David Karel, *André Biéler: At the Crossroads of Canadian Painting* (Quebec City: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 2004), 109–57.

3. Jean-Pierre Bonneville, "Les quatre-vingts ans de Marc-Aurèle Fortin," *La Frontière* (Rouyn), March 13, 1968, 7–9.

4. Joseph Jutras to Ernest Aubin, November 16, 1950, Archives Joseph Jutras.

5. René Buisson, *Marc-Aurèle Fortin: un maître inconnu* (Montreal: Musée Marc-Aurèle Fortin, 1995), 95, cited in Marie-Claude Corbeil, Elizabeth Moffatt, Claude Belleau, Eric J. Henderson, and Jennifer Poulin, "Une étude des matériaux et techniques de Marc-Aurèle Fortin," *Journal of the Canadian Association for Conservation* (JCAC) 43 (2018): 6.

6. We specify "from the east," which is how the full title of the work appears in the prize list of the fall 1949 exhibition at Galerie L'Art français: *Grande-Vallée, vue d'est*. It is worth pointing out because the same exhibition featured another painting, at #13, *Grande-Vallée, vue d'ouest* ("from the west"). It's painted on the same size board as our *Paysage Grande-Vallée* and figures in the catalogue raisonné along with the watercolour it was painted from.

7. Oil on particle board, 121.9 × 183 cm (presumably from a private collection), showing more or less the same point of view. Special thanks to Sarah Mainguy for her generous assistance in researching works that depict Grande-Vallée.

8. Jean-René Ostiguy, "Marc-Aurèle Fortin," *Vie des Arts* (Montreal), no. 23, Summer 1961, 31.

**ESTIMATE: \$400,000 – 600,000**